

Provincial Prairie Forage Associations Launch Regional Soil Health Network

Prairie Region Soil Health Network connects Prairie Canada's marquee soil-health focused Conferences to Prairie Farmers, Producers and Ranchers

Winnipeg, MB (April 13, 2021) – Organizers of Prairie Canada's top conferences around soil health, grazing and regenerative agriculture are joining forces to work with, promote and celebrate each provincial group's event and organizational activities with the launch of the Prairie Region Soil Health Network.

Western Canada Conference on Soil Health and Grazing (Alberta), Saskatchewan Forage Council (SFC) and Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association (MFGA) have all connected their annual events and organizational activities via a jointly-signed Memorandum of Understanding to work collaboratively and together to make sure the interests of Prairie Canada farmers and producers are front and center via the connectivity of the Prairie Region Soil Health Network.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted producer-focused conferences all across North America, and we know first-hand how that impact has influenced our ability to plan, host and engage producer audiences via gatherings and conferences across Canada's Prairies," says Duncan Morrison, executive director, Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association (MFGA) whose organization has hosted three differently-formatted Regenerative Agriculture Conferences in their three years of hosting an annual event. "Our agriculture conferences are critical lifelines for each of our smaller-sized groups. We need them for the attendance gate and financial reasons, but most of all, we need them as a place and opportunity for producers to network and learn and share knowledge among each other."

Out west, under the leadership of Nora Paulovich and Laura Gibney, the bi-annual Alberta Soil Health and Grazing Conference has grown into a can't-miss event for many prairie farmers and ranchers interested in what goes on below the surface in the soil as much as on it. More than 550 producers attended in-person at the most recent Alberta event in 2019. Paulovich said the Alberta conference team felt the pandemic scenario was too uncertain to hold a well-attended in-person event in 2021 and have subsequently moved planning for their every-two-year event to 2022, something the new network will help communicate.

"It makes total sense to support each other with a collaborative Prairie approach," says Paulovich.

According to Morrison, the new agreement broadens the collective wingspan for all three of provincial groups to amplify the producer opportunities and promote the conferences and the work each are doing in whatever format, from online to in-person events to webinars around our various projects and platforms. MFGA drew more than a combined 1,000 online viewers to four Thursday night webcasts over the month of November 2020 after the pandemic switched conference plans from in-person to virtual. MFGA's plans this year are circling a hybrid of online and a smaller gathering in-

person November 15-17, 2021 in Brandon. Exact details are still being worked out in respect to provincial health orders and forecasts.

Saskatchewan Forage Council (SFC) chose to cancel their inaugural 2021 event due to the pandemic. Shannon McArton, SFC executive director, says the decision was ultimately the right choice. But it did leave her excited about the promise of things ahead, especially with the collaborative approach of the like-minded groups on either side of Saskatchewan's east-west borders.

"We haven't stopped planning since we were forced to postpone," says McArton. "SFC is partnered with the Saskatchewan Soil Conservation Association to deliver the first Saskatchewan Soil Health and Grazing Conference just as soon as we can. Working with this Prairie group to share ideas and networks and cross-promote our events will be a great boost for us and the other two organizations and ultimately all the producers we represent and network with."

The group also plans to accelerate their shared dialogues and support the regional interests of each other via collaboration, possible project alignments with regional focus and integrated communications via each group's regular communications channels.

"Prairie Canada is a very unique and vitally important agricultural region of Canada that has a rich and robust history of producer connections, organizational synergy and farmer-based networks between our three provinces," says Morrison. "We feel that in many ways, like many groups out there, the pandemic has forced us to regroup and rethink how we can go forward as a regional-focused network that works for Prairie producers with conferences and project collaborations aimed specifically at their core interests around soil health, regenerative agriculture and grazing systems on their Prairie farms."

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